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## Idaho Transportation Department

### Today's News Briefs

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(Iowa) High gas prices, airport snags put Amtrak ridership near record

DES MOINES, Iowa - Ridership aboard Amtrak trains in Iowa has remained at near-record levels, thanks to travelers seeking alternatives to high gasoline prices and airport waiting lines.

A total of 61,377 people got on and off Amtrak trains at six Iowa stations during the federal budget year that ended Sept. 30, the railroad said. That was a fraction of a percentage point lower than the railroad's all-time high of 61,418 passengers in Iowa one year earlier.

Many Iowans will board railroad cars this week as Amtrak adds dozens of trains nationwide to deal with a crush of travelers expected for the Thanksgiving holiday. As usual, the largest number of travelers will be on the highways, while others will head for airports. The AAA motor club estimates that 37 million Americans will be on the road this week.

"Our experience anecdotally has been that when gasoline prices make a major move, people search for alternatives for their travel plans. For a lot of people, we are a great alternative," said Amtrak spokesman Marc Magliari in Chicago. Nationwide, Amtrak served a record 24.3 million passengers over the recent 12-month period - nearly 300,000 more than for the same trains in the previous fiscal year.

At the Travel Center in Des Moines, which specializes in train trips, Amtrak business has been brisk, partly due to travelers who want to avoid headaches encountered in airports, said Rick South, the travel agency's co-owner. Iowans have been riding trains to Denver, Chicago and many other places, he said.

"Air travel is such a hassle, you know," particularly because of security restrictions that are not required at Amtrak stations, South said. "For people who don't like to fly in the first place, the next thing they are going to do is Amtrak."

Amtrak operates two daily trains that pass through Iowa between Chicago and the West Coast. The California Zephyr serves Burlington, Mount Pleasant, Ottumwa, Osceola and Creston. The Southwest Chief has a stop in Fort Madison.

Cathy Johnson of Iowa City is perhaps one of Iowa's biggest railroad fans. Over the past year, she rode Amtrak trains to Williamsburg, Va., to tour the historic community; to the San Francisco area to visit her two sons and grandchildren; and to New York City to spend a week watching Broadway plays with friends. Next May she plans to take a train trip to Lewisburg, W. Va., for a stay in the Allegheny Mountains' woodlands.

"It's just a wonderful way to travel. I don't do any long-distance driving," said Johnson, a longtime activist with the National Association of Railroad Passengers. She usually boards Amtrak in Mount Pleasant, about 50 miles south of Iowa City.

People riding Amtrak's long-distance trains that run through Iowa need a hefty dose of patience. The California Zephyr ran late 93 percent of the time during the past federal budget year; the Southwest Chief was late 27 percent of the time, Amtrak records show.

Much of the problem with the California Zephyr's lack of punctuality can be attributed to worn tracks between Reno, Nev., and Salt Lake City, Magliari said. Trains running on this segment have to slow down, losing time from a schedule developed for faster train speeds, he said.

Although Amtrak's future has been the subject of heated debates in Washington, D.C., in recent years, Magliari insisted the future is bright. He noted several states are expanding passenger train service. One

is Illinois, where Amtrak last month added two daily trains along the Chicago-St. Louis corridor. Amtrak has also begun making additional round trips on the Chicago-Carbondale and Chicago-Quincy lines.

The expansion in Illinois occurred because the Illinois General Assembly increased its passenger rail subsidy to Amtrak from \$12.1 million to \$24 million, Amtrak officials said.

The Iowa Legislature does not provide state money to run Amtrak trains.

A proposed nine-state Midwest passenger network was unveiled in 1998 that would include train service from Chicago to Omaha with stops in Davenport, Iowa City, Des Moines and possibly other cities such as Newton and Atlantic. But plans for the Iowa train have never received money from Congress or the Iowa Legislature, and the idea remains just a dream for railroad passenger enthusiasts.

"What has to happen is that the citizens of Iowa need to make it clear that it's time for the state to start providing choices for travel," said Richard Harnish, executive director of the Midwest High-Speed Rail Association in Chicago. "When people in Des Moines start demanding that they should be able to take the train to Chicago or Omaha and then connect to other places, that's when it will happen."

Des Moines hasn't had regularly scheduled passenger train service since May 31, 1970, when the Rock Island Lines' Cornbelt Rocket train ceased operations. It traveled between Council Bluffs and Chicago on tracks now owned by the Iowa Interstate Railroad.